

Rereading the City: Race, Space, and Mobility in Post 9/11 New York

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way in which the racialized immigrant engages with the modern global city in two recent novels: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011). Both texts take post-9/11 New York City as a landscape that focalizes concerns of mobility, race, and the city. I argue that these novels suggest that the ways in which the racialized immigrant interact with the city are shaped by different forms of mobility, and that these reveal different possibilities for a critique of the city as a site of modernity. It is argued that while *Netherland* ultimately affirms a conservative understanding of race in the post-9/11 city, *Open City* focuses on a moral ambiguity that allows for a radical critique of the metropole through its engagement with race, history, and the flaneur.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author Deena Dinat.

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1. Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this first chapter I aim to establish the theoretical context with which the proceeding chapters of my thesis will engage. In considering the central research question of this thesis — *how does the racialized figure engage in a critique of the city?* — I need to first establish the terms and concepts that shape a reading of the primary texts dealt with in chapters two and three. I begin with elaborating the historical, economic, and political narratives that have shaped New York City's position in the modern world as a global city. I argue that it is a repository for a version of modernity, globalized commerce, and normative ways of being against which the racialized figures of *Netherland* and *Open City* must struggle. Secondly, I look at key theoretical concepts that have concerned the historical and literary challenges to the normative space of the city, particularly from a critical race theory perspective. The work of Paul Gilroy and Franz Fanon is of particular interest as I attempt to engage with the experience of racialization in the city, and argue that it is necessarily a challenge to the dominant narratives that shape the experience of the city. Thirdly, I focus on different forms of mobility and the opportunities they offer for enabling a critique of the city. The experiences of driving and walking the city, I argue, allow for very different forms of engagement with space. Finally, I look at the narrative relationships between the city and the text, and argue that the slippery relationship between the two is a particularly powerful device in the works that I consider later in this thesis.

1.2 THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE OF NEW YORK CITY

Saskia Sassen articulates what she understands to be the “dominant economic narrative” embodied by the city. Sassen identifies a “particular kind of urban form that dominates our image of today’s advanced urban economy... the agglomeration of high-rise corporate offices... the image of the postindustrial city” (23). New York City is one of the few metropolises (along with Tokyo and London) that symbolically represent “the internationalized corporate services complex... one habitually thought to constitute the essence of an advanced postindustrial economy” (24). This dominant economic narrative has three components. First is the fundamental notion of “continuous flow, also referred to as trickle down: the idea that there are no structural barriers to the circulation of economic growth, or no discontinuities to be negotiated in this circulation and installation of economic growth” (186). For capital — and by extension the global city — a founding image is that of unlimited and unrestricted movement. The second key strand of the dominant economic narrative is “economic internationalization,” which Sassen argues “privileges certain elements and has only silences about others. The discussion about the internationalization of the economic privileges the reconstitution of capital as an internationalized presence... At the same time it remains absolutely silent about another crucial element of this internationalization” (187). That corollary is the internationalization of labour for which we are “still using the language of immigration” (187). While the movement of capital is thought of as seamless, the movement of people — particularly those from the developing world

to the industrialized centres of capitalism —still adheres to outmoded concepts of a world economic system from a century ago. The third and final aspect of the dominant economic narrative identified by Sassen is that the modern economic system concentrates power, control, and profit in such a way that it “constitutes a centre and then valorizes it” (187). New York City is a primary centre. The city acts as both “a site for concrete operations of the economy... [in which] a large share of the jobs involved in finance, for example, are lowly paid clerical and manual jobs, many held by women and immigrants. These types of workers and jobs do not fit the dominant representation of what the premier industry of this period is about” (188). The city also “concentrates diversity [and demonstrates] an interesting correspondence between great concentrations of corporate power and large concentrations of an amalgamated ‘other’” (188).

The global city, therefore, is one that presents itself in the terms of a series of contradictions: capital is fluid while certain human bodies are restricted in their movements. The financial services sector is valorized, whereas those who labour within it are denied a role in that vision of the city. The movement of capital is called globalization, whereas the movement of people from the marginal spaces of the world is termed immigration. This is the contradictory space of the global city in which both *Netherland* and *Open City* engage, albeit it in conflicting ways. I am concerned with the marginal figure in both texts, those who do not accede to the dominant economic narrative that the city presents as its natural state of being. These marginal figures I argue, disaggregate this dominant narrative, challenging the assumptions of the city and opening it to radical critique.

My treatment of the city is in contrast to more older, general definitions of the city, such as one espoused by sociologist Louis Wirth: “A city is a large dense permanent settlement of

socially heterogeneous individuals” (“Urbanism as a Way of Life” 44). I would argue that this definition, in its attempt to provide a universal concept of the city, fails to engage with the material, physical impacts of the dominant class and economic power structures. The global city is different from the city in Wirth’s definition because it has this dominant economic narrative at its core — its status as a global city is dependent on the idea of the city as a home for globalized capital. As such it is not merely a settlement, but rather a physical focal point of a particular economic and political system. While I want to avoid the kind of universalism that Wirth seeks in his definition, I do not propose my reading of New York City and its dominant economic narrative to be a complete version of the city. If, as Wirth-Nesher writes, “Most concepts of the metropolis — whether those of the historian, sociologist, urban planner, novelist, or literary scholar — strive to be universal, but are bound by the specific conditions of their origin,” then the city necessarily morphs in its definitions and contours (4). My particular version of New York City takes its economic status as a way of looking at issues of immigration, race, and mobility in the 21st century.

A focus on a Marxist analysis of the city — as employed by Sassen and Wirth-Nesher — is limited, however. It is a limitation taken up by theorist Henri Lefebvre. In Kennedy’s reading of Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*:

Lefebvre wants us to see that space is not simply the parameter or stage of social relations and actions, rather it is operative in the ‘assembly’ of these. He argues that traditional dualities of physical space and mental space are bridged by the processes of the production of space, especially as these are enacted through ‘spatial practice’ which he finds not on political

economy (the more obvious Marxist focus), but on the material experience of social relations in 'everyday life' (2).

I think this tension, between material conditions of the city and the social relations of being in the city, is a tension that speaks to a core concern of this paper: how does the 'everyday life' of the racialized immigrant engage with the formidable economic, political, and social entity of the city? According to Lefebvre's dialectic of the city as a social space, "This space was *produced* before being *read*; nor was it produced in order to be read and grasped, but rather in order to be *lived* by people with bodies and lives" (143). The process of reading a city, therefore, is a process of living it — of embodiment and phenomenological experience — at the same time as it is about production. Living, of course, is also trapped in this dialectic of already being produced before it is read: later I will consider the ways in which Fanon argues about the overdetermination of visible difference, but it is enough to say here that this process of living the city is a fraught one.

In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault juxtaposes two epistemological modes: the nineteenth century, he wrote, was obsessed with history and "with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world" (22). What he proposes, at the end of the twentieth century, is that the "present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (22). Edward Soja references Foucault's prediction, but to argue that "no hegemonic shift has yet occurred to

allow the critical eye — or the critical I — to see spatiality with the same acute depth of vision that comes with a focus on *durée*” (11). Soja instead advocates for a critical theory that engages with the entanglement of the spatial and the historical. If we accept this order of things — of the city space as produced before it is read — then the practice of being, of living, in that sentence is necessarily reactionary and challenging to the power that produces space.

1.3 RESISTANCE FROM/TO THE CITY

While the dominant narratives of the city are long-standing and well-developed, so too is the history of resistance to these narratives. Maria Balshaw writes about the influence of black New York City in the American psyche: “In the history of the twentieth-century African American experience and letters it is Harlem that has held pride of place as the urban locus for an African American national imaginary” (1). As a refuge for newly freed slaves at the end of the 19th century, Harlem — and by extension New York City — came to signify a form of freedom and community to African Americans across the country. What emerged, of course, was both a confirmation and a refutation of this expectation. The city is both a place that rejects the racialized figure through economic, legal, and social mechanisms, while writing “from the Harlem Renaissance onwards reminds one immediately just how central the city is, as a site of creativity and aspiration, to African Americans” (Balshaw 2). So too is the city a site of critique, from those who are simultaneously included in the city while excluded from certain representations of it. New York City, and Harlem in particular, has a concurrent history as a site of black expression and idealism. This is to say that while there is the dominant narrative of the

city, as expressed by Sassen through economic and infrastructural terms, there is also a long and rich history of resistance from within the city — in both the artistic and the political realms.

As Balshaw states when she paraphrases Gilroy, “this [history] clearly places African Americans as insiders to an essentially Enlightenment narrative of modernisation and progress. It critiques the myths of modernity not through asserting that African Americans are outside or exiled by these myths, but by pointing out how the experience of migration to the North, and the subsequent narratives of urban life generated by these migrants, place African Americans as players in the story of the making of America and the American city despite the material and racial prohibitions encountered in the urban environment” (16). I want to extend this model of being and resistance in the city to those from outside the African American context, and instead look at what possibilities exist for the racialized immigrant in 21st century New York. While building on the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and its literary and political legacy the global city is an increasingly heterogeneous space, which opens it to new and hybrid forms of critique from those who are both within the city and marginal to it.

This mode of deconstructing dominant historical, political, and social narratives is adapted in part from Gilroy’s seminal work in *The Black Atlantic*. In particular, his questions around method are of particular interest: “How are the discontinuous histories of diaspora resistance raised in fictional form... How have they been theorised by those who have experienced the consequences of racial domination?” (30). This resistance is partly driven by what Gilroy describes as the “double consciousness” of being both European and black (1). Gilroy argues that “all blacks in the West [...] stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed

them and assumed new configurations” (1). One of the effects of this double consciousness, I argue, is the ability of the racialized figure in the city to challenge the dominant narratives of Western modernity as expressed by a city like New York.

Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio take up Gilroy’s challenge to the dominant narratives of Western modernity in *Beyond the Black Atlantic* and broaden the idea of the crisis at the heart of the current iteration of globalized modernity. “If we are, indeed, today witnessing a crisis of the idea of globalization, it is in more than one sense overdue, since the very basis for the story of globalization — a faith in technological progress and continual enlightenment — has effectively been deconstructed within the postcolonial domain, along with simplified ideas of the technical impotence of the periphery” (1). If we can locate this empty centre at the heart of Western modernity in New York City— the financial and technological home of globalization — then the deconstructive postcolonial project has taken the city as its battleground in *Netherland* and *Open City*. This crisis has only deepened since 9/11:

The fact that the remaining western superpower is economically overreaching itself in order to afford an intimidating display of military power, that is neglecting inner stability and the happiness and welfare of its own citizens for the phantasm of world hegemony, that, finally it is losing world markets to emerging Asian powers, all indicates a deep crisis of unidirectional western ideals of progress and globalization. (1-2)

While *Beyond the Black Atlantic* looks to the postcolonial “periphery” for challenges to modernity, I argue that the peripheral challenge to the centre is an embodied experience of

resistance that is enacted by racialized immigrant bodies at the intersection of this centre and crisis of modernity. A related methodological and historical perspective is borrowed from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, which attempts to reconsider the narratives of Western history from a subaltern perspective. In his work, Chakrabarty interrogates the foundational narratives of the Western state:

What effectively is played down, however, in histories that either implicitly or explicitly celebrate the advent of the modern state and the idea of citizenship is the repression and violence that are as instrumental in the victory of the modern as is the persuasive power of its rhetorical strategies. Nowhere is this irony — the undemocratic foundations of 'democracy' — more visible than in the history of modern medicine, public health, and personal hygiene, the discourses of which have been central in *locating the body of the modern at the intersection of the public and private*. (21. Italics my own)

If we consider New York City (in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) to be the apotheosis of several Western narratives of enlightenment ideals — of freemarket economics, citizenship, modernity and such — then both *Netherland* and *Open City* are engaged with Chakrabarty's methodological and historical maneuver by taking on the centre of those narratives as a site for deconstruction from those 'below.' How do the undemocratic foundations of the democratic city present themselves to the racialized immigrant? How does the experience of race and citizenship unfold before those from outside the naturalized space of Western modernity?

One of the key considerations is the visual and embodied experiences of racialization. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon speaks about the particularly visual, even photographic, nature of being a racialized figure in a European space. “Look! A Negro!” is a call that brings Fanon’s consciousness to an experience of visual, embodied different (89). “As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others,” Fanon writes (89). The western city offers a unique space for engagement with Otherness, and, as Fanon suggests, with one’s own experience of always already being othered. “I’m not given a second chance I am overdetermined from the outside,” he continues, “I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance... The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*” (95). In literary representation, this overdetermination of racial identity is described by Patricia McKee: “The most important difference between representations of white and nonwhite characters...is not between abstract and embodied identities per se but between a theoretically open symbolics of white identity, and representations of limited, exclusive identity” (*Producing American Races* 7). Whiteness, normative as it is, exists in the city as “transcendent, self-contained, mobile, and invisible,” while the ontology of the racialized body is always predetermined in the western metropolis, fixed in its very being as Other (Romeyn, xxi).

Here I would like to briefly consider the relationship between blackness and broader concerns of racialization as I use them in this thesis. As is already evident, much of my theoretical context is centred on work that is concerned with blackness; work cited by Gilroy and Fanon is focused on the Caribbean and the Americas in particular. My discussion of race in this thesis is *not* centred on blackness as such, but rather considers the specific case of blackness to

suggest ways in which we can think about how race operates in the Western world more generally. There is, of course, the danger of decontextualizing ideas of blackness to a more generalized idea of racialization to the point that it ignores the complexities of these distinctions. My intention, however, is to suggest the ways in which those who occupy the role of the racial other might seek commonality or a sense of political agency in the space of the normative, white, global city. Thus my discussion of Chuck Ramkissoon, the Caribbean migrant of South Asian descent, and Julius, half black Nigerian and half white German, focuses on ways in which one might consider their existence as other in the city and an attempts to consider that position as one that has agency. My own thinking on these issues stems from my experience of political racial solidarity in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and broader decolonization movements that sought political agency in the 20th century. Furthermore, I acknowledge the fact that the black history of the United States is vastly different from those I consider in my thesis. While I want to acknowledge those histories — the Harlem Renaissance is one such reference — my concern is with the modern racialized immigrant experience, which often overlaps with the African-American one, but with obvious distinctions and differences.

These claims of race and being in the city are complex, and the 'everyday life' that Lefebvre argues constitutes the social production of the city cannot be simply applied to the racialized figure. His (and in the texts discussed here, always *his*) engagement with the city is overdetermined, decided by centuries of racial and colonial history. As my thesis will continue to argue, the racialized body in the global city is always in a marginal position of immediate otherness, of unbelonging. It is precisely this position that allows for his critique of the city and its power structures.

1.4 MOBILITY AND THE MEDIATED ENCOUNTER

One of the reasons the city has the potential for subversion is because of the particular opportunities it presents for the intimate encounter. Density, commerce, and public transport — they all constitute what Liam Kennedy calls urbanity, “the phenomenon of collectivity which emerges from the close proximity of strangers and face-to-face relations in public urban space” (3). This places the body, and the movement of that body, as central to the experience of the city and of urbanity. In addition to the consideration of the racialized body in the city, mobility is a key consideration when engaging with the relationships between the characters of *Netherland* and *Open City*. There are two primary forms of movement in these novels that I want to consider as part of my critical engagement with being-in-the-city. In *Netherland*, Hans’s experience of the city is primarily negotiated through the mechanized, structured space of the car, the taxi, the paved motorway. Denied a learner’s driving permit due a bureaucratic error, Hans’s reaction is telling of the class implications of the automobile:

And so I was in a state of fuming helplessness when I stepped out into the inverted obscurity of the afternoon. As I stood there, thrown by Herald Square’s flows of pedestrians and the crazed traffic diagonals and the gray, seemingly bottomless gutter pools, I was seized for the first time by a nauseating sense of America, my gleaming adopted country, in the secret actuation of unjust, indifferent powers. The rinsed taxis, hissing over fresh slush, shone like grapefruits; but if you looked down into the space between the road and the undercarriage,

where icy matter stuck to pipes and water streamed down the mud flaps, you saw a foul mechanical dark. (68)

To be among the pedestrians of the city is to be exposed to the nauseating throng of “seemingly bottomless gutter pools” and, in Hans’s own minor way, “unjust, indifferent powers.” The car represents a kind of mobility that distances one from the city of social relations, from the throngs of bodies that so threaten the protagonist. In my second chapter I will argue that this valorization of the automobile is part of *Netherland*’s more conservative, restricted perspective on race, otherness, and the city.

The second form of mobility that I consider is the flaneur, or the city-walker. In Benjamin’s seminal work on the flaneur, he describes the “[d]ialectic of flanerrie: on one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man. Presumably, it is this dialectic that is developed in ‘The Man of the Crowd’” (*The Arcades Project* 420). This dialectic seems to consider visibility as a key marker of the flaneur: to be in the city is to be both seen and seeing, individual and a part of the masses. When coupled with Fanon’s experience of blackness and visibility, the racialized walker is no longer simply a man of the crowd, but rather an outsider within it. There is nothing, it seems, “utterly undiscoverable” or “hidden” about the racialized figure of Julius in *Open City*. Instead both are characters who must engage with the city as an already determined racialized figure. Thus walking as a physical mode of negotiating the city is fraught with a phenomenological politics. When *Open City* begins, in media res — with the conjunction “and” — it is with mobility as its core concern: “And so when I began to go on even walks last fall, I

found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city,” Cole begins (3). This experience places Julius within Benjamin’s framework of the ‘Man of the Crowd,’ which Cole self-consciously echoes: “Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of the day, but the impress of those countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them” (6). The dialectic of walking, of being both within and outside the crowd, is thus of immediate concern to Cole, and forms the novel’s epistemological engagement with the city, history, and race. Cole’s novel participates in the dialectic espoused by Benjamin, but problematizes this role of the inside-outsider throughout. This form of mobility is fraught with a politics of the body; an embodiment of history, class, gender, and nation that allows for a sustained consideration of the city.

1. 5 THE CITY AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS

The relationship between the city and its fictional representations is a complex one. I would argue that the city that exists in its physical form — streets, buildings, people — is in itself a representation of a long history, a history of settlement and colonialism, of commerce and trade, of communities and individual lives and deaths. The physical, lived New York City is then the subject of its own representation in *Netherland* and *Open City*. This process of representation is further complicated by the “novelists, readers, and characters [who] are all engaged in verbal cartography, plotting cities through language” (Wirth-Nesher 4). The process of representation is thus never a fixed one, nor unidirectional. Instead it is in constant interplay, between the

historical, economic and social conditions that make the physical city possible, and then the interplay between that physical city and its fictional representations and back again. Like Wirth-Nesher, Liam Kennedy and Maria Balshaw engage the city as spaces that are a “register of not only built forms but also of embedded ideologies” (8-9) while literature and art “produce and maintain but also... challenge and question, common notions of urban existence” (9). This idea of the city being written by the individual experience is one further elaborated by Wirth-Nesher: “The emphasis on the reader of the city rather than on the identification of universal features has marked recent debate about cities in a variety of fields. In their essays on urban semiotics, both Eco and Barthes have emphasized the indeterminacy of urban landmarks, pointing out the necessity for absent centres and empty signifiers, for ‘meaning derived’ from urbanites themselves” (7). The ability of readers — and here I use the term to designate both those who directly experience the city, and those of us who read novels that do the same — to read the city in subjective, variegated ways is also a chance for critique. In Barthes’s discussion of the semiology of the city, he notes that the city:

essentially and semantically, is the place of our meeting with the *other*, and it is for this reason that the centre is the gathering place in every city...

When they express their image of the city, they always have a tendency to limit, to concentrate, to condense the centre; the city centre is felt as the place of exchange of social activities.... Better still, the city centre is always felt as the space where subversive forces, forces of rupture, ludic forces act and meet. (171)

Barthes' consideration of the city also suggests why it opens itself to critique. The city seems to contain an inherent contradiction, of both concentrating and condensing its social, economic and cultural production, while also being the space that is the "place of our meeting with the *other*." This concentration of power would initially seem to be a reification of the self — the normative image of the city — but as Sassen demonstrates with regard to labour, and Barthes more broadly, it is also dependent on otherness. I want to explore the inverse of what Barthes argues is essential to the city, to consider *otherness* (the otherness of race, nation, and class) as the point of departure for being in the city. This otherness, I believe, allows for Barthes's final point in the quote above: it allows for rupture, for subversion.

This relationship between city, language, and textual representation is of particular concern in the postcolonial text. As Ashcroft et al write, "The post-colonial text, negotiating as it does the space between the textual language and the lived space becomes the metonym of the continual process of reclamation, as a cultural reality is both *posited* and *reclaimed* from the incorporating dominance of English" (391). While both the Irish O'Neill and Nigerian Cole write in English, they are also engaged with this dialectic of positing and reclaiming space through a subjectivity that is driven by "a concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft et al, 346). The relationship between the postcolonial writer (that is to say, the author who uses English to interrogate its own historical and political genealogy) echoes the concerns of these primary texts: how does the outsider represent the city in which he is both an important labourer and an excluded racialized other? Language and the body thus perform similar functions in both the text and the city, and they serve to excavate power from within the linguistic or physical space of power.

Befitting a city of its rich and long history, New York's literary legacy is one that cannot be easily summarized here. Instead I want to gesture towards the complexity of the city and look at particular literary precursors for each text in subsequent chapters. As Robert Smith points out, New York is "the oldest immigrant city in the United States" and it remains an exemplar of a particularly American narrative: one of equal opportunity, of diversity (Smith et al, 3). *Migration, Transnationalization, and Race in a Changing New York*, an anthology edited by Hector Cordero-Guzmán, Robert Smith, and Ramón Grosfoguel, points towards the complex interplay between this idea of New York as a home for ambitious immigrants and a place of continued segregation. As a global centre (in both economic and cultural terms), New York has been the "primary initial destination for Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and other black and Latino immigrants, and a main destination for African Americans migrating from the south" (Smith et al, 5). This history of migration has also made the city a "site for the development of a sophisticated stratification system where racial phenotype, immigrant status, and ethnicity and nationality all figured into creating racializing hierarchies, which evolved as the definitions of whiteness and blackness, and other categories, have changed" (Smith et al, 5). The city, therefore, is simultaneously a space that welcomes immigrants while ensuring that racial stratifications are enforced and maintained. The ways in which these stratifications have been negotiated has been of particular interest.

One particularly salient and productive meditation of the city's racial dynamics in the post-9/11 era is Spike Lee's *25th Hour* — which follows an Irish-American drug dealer in the last hours before his incarceration. The film directly confronts the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Centre, with its opening dwelling on the beams of light that briefly replaced the

towers, and its characters examining the rubble from an apartment adjacent to Ground Zero. In the wake of this literal and structural violence is Lee's engagement with the intersections of New York's racial, national, religious and cultural enclaves. Inherent to the city, Lee's film seems to argue is a barely veiled violence, an essentialising anger that both divides and unites the city. Midway through the film the protagonist explodes in an extended monologue:

Fuck you and this whole city and everyone in it... the Sikhs and the Pakistanis bombing down the avenues in decrepit cabs, curry steaming out their pores stinking up my day. Terrorists in fucking training... the Korean grocers with their pyramids of overpriced fruit and their tulips and roses wrapped in plastic. Ten years in the country, still no speak-y English? Fuck the Russians in Brighton Beach... Fuck the uptown brothers. They never pass the ball, they don't want to play defense, they take five steps on every lay-up to the hoop. And then they want to turn around and blame everything on the white man. Slavery ended one hundred and thirty-seven years ago.

The list continues, barely pausing between the otherwise strictly defined boundaries between these immigrant groups. Lee's engagement with difference, with otherness, in the city is deeply shaped by the externalised violence of 9/11. In some sense, and it is a theme that will re-emerge in subsequent chapters, these considerations of race, mobility, and the city take on new meanings when confronted with the foundational historical (and literal) violence of New York.

1.6 CONCLUSION

How does the racialized immigrant subject offer a critique of the global city? How does the city allow for and reject these critiques? These are the core concerns of this thesis that I would like to consider with respect to Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, a novel that begins with the death of a West Indian migrant before circling back to engage with the ways in which the city is navigated through subjects of economic, racial, and cultural difference.

2. Chapter 2: *Netherland*

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I consider a novel that compels this project's overarching questions: in what ways can the racialized body challenge the power of the global city? How does mobility allow for, or deny, this opportunity for critique? I argue that while *Netherland* suggests the possibilities of racialized agency and a rethinking of the city from a position of otherness, it ultimately reaffirms a conservative, regressive understanding of both the city and the racialized immigrant. Ostensibly about several overlapping concerns — trauma in post-9/11 New York, the legacies of the Dutch, British, and American empires, transnational movement — Joseph O'Neill's novel has the dead body of a racialized immigrant at its centre as the ultimate expression of immobility. Hans van den Broek, a Dutch banker who splits his time between New York and London, receives a call at the beginning of the novel that sparks a lengthy retrospective account of his relationship with Chuck Ramkissoon — a Trinidadian migrant of South Indian ethnicity. "She tells me that Chuck's 'remains' have been found in the Gowanus Canal," Hans says of the phone call. "There were handcuffs around his wrists and evidently he was the victim of a murder" (5). It is this violent image, of a man bound, killed and disposed of in the Gowanus canal, an early colonial Dutch port that still serves the borough of Brooklyn, that sparks a narrative recollection for Hans. In this chapter I want to suggest that a comparison between Hans's and Chuck's experience of the city — in particular their experiences of death and mobility

— illuminates some of the ways in which the city presents itself in contradictory, complex ways to immigrant characters of vastly different economic, social, and racial backgrounds.

I would like to begin by considering the critical reception of the novel, as well as a specific critique about its treatment of the question of authenticity. Chuck's role as *authentic* in the text is one that I contend is part of the novel's conservative treatment of race. I argue that both the primary characters and the text trade in different forms of being in the city — the legitimate and the authentic — for a sense of belonging, and that this is a complex and often problematic indication of how race, ethnicity, and class interact in the novel. Secondly, I would like to consider the role of death in *Netherland* and, more broadly, in the city. Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and Michel Foucault's biopolitics offer a theoretical framework for thinking about the conditions that allow for certain lives to be lived and certain deaths to be suffered in the physical space of the city. I argue that in *Netherland*, the death of the racialized body is itself both the underlying logic of the novel — what makes the narrative possible — while also the predicate of what makes the city possible in its modern form. Finally, I argue that the novel's engagement with different forms of mobility show the ways in which the phenomenological engagement with the city is determined by technologies of movement. These technologies, and their correlations with class, immigration, and race are mediating forces in the experience of the city.

2.2 CRITICAL RECEPTION AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY

The novel was praised upon its publication in 2008 — *Netherland* won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2009, joining a small, elite group that includes Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, and Richard Ford. A *New Yorker* reviewer called it: “one of the most remarkable postcolonial books I have ever read” and goes on to compare it to a modern retelling of *The Great Gatsby* (Wood). These kinds of accolades indicate its place in the postcolonial and American canon.

Of course, it is not without its critics. In particular, I want to build upon novelist and essayist Zadie Smith’s critique of *Netherland* and suggest that her essay highlights some of the problematic aspects of the novel’s attempt to deal with race in particular. Smith’s discussion of the text’s obsession with an idea of authenticity that is particularly relevant to this chapter, and something I want to consider throughout. The claim to authenticity is a problematic one, I argue. As Gareth Griffiths contends, a voice that seeks authenticity exists when the “possibilities of subaltern speech are contained by the discourse of the oppressor” while simultaneously the goal of authenticity overwrites the “actual complexity of difference” (237-238). He goes on to paraphrase Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, which seems to suggest that “the possibility of subaltern speech exists principally and crucially when its mediation through mimicry and parody of the dominant discourse subverts and menaces the authority within which it necessarily comes into being” (240). I consider the claim to authenticity as one that serves the interests of white normativity in *Netherland*, and one that essentialises the figure of Chuck as the exotic other who serves to bolster Hans’s own identity. Authenticity fixes the possibilities for Chuck’s existence,

and is one of the ways in which his role in the text is limited by his relationship to Hans's whiteness.

The combination of anxiety and authenticity is the primary voice of the novel: "It's a novel that wants you to know that it knows you know it knows," Smith explains in a deliberately circular sentence (75). The text is seemingly aware of its problematic depictions of race and identity. It can have its narrator write of his experience in India in one section:

some of these men wore a shirt; some did not. Most wore a lungi arranged like a skirt. They were small and thin and poor and dark-skinned with thin arms and thin legs... For some reason, I keep on seeing these men. I do not think of Chuck as one of them, even though, with his very dark skin, he could have been one of them. I think of Chuck as the Chuck I saw. But whenever I see these men I always end up seeing Chuck (230).

Netherland can seemingly get away with this kind of ethnic essentialism because, in an earlier scene, it had another character highlight it: "She has accused me of exoticizing [sic] Chuck Ramkissoon... of perpetuating a white man's infantilizing elevation of a black man" (166). The novel, it seems, attempts to have it both ways — it is told through a conservative, apolitical protagonist who sees racial otherness as an entry into a sense of belonging after his familial life is destroyed by the attacks of 9/11, while it is also seemingly aware of its participation in the idea of exoticism.

The principle characters of the novel — narrator Hans and his exoticised erstwhile friend and potential business partner Chuck — are engaged in different forms of belonging in the city.

Hans's access to the city is determined through his economic value: he transfers from London (one of Saskia Sassen's other "global cities") to New York as an oil trader with his lawyer wife. His presence in the city is legitimized by his participation in the function of New York as a global city; he is precisely the kind of economic migrant that the city projects as its ideal citizen. The city, too, rewards this immigrant. Hans writes of his move to New York in the late 1990s: "It was quickly my impression, in this last regard, that making a million bucks in New York was essentially a question of walking down the street" (91). It is clear that the city, until 9/11, embraces Hans as both a generator and recipient of wealth. Thus, while Hans carries the privileged identity of the mobile business class, his friend Chuck evokes scepticism in Smith, who questions the idea of the authenticity that his character represents.

Here I would like to differentiate Chuck as *authentic* from Hans as *legitimate*. Both terms speak to a form of belonging in the city, but offer different conditions for each form. The legitimate speaks to the state, the law, and the economic realm. Much of the political theory on legitimacy addresses the way in which the state is rendered viable: its subjects have faith in authority, an act of faith that confers power to the state. Weber, for example, writes that "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (382). If we accept this formulation of legitimate authority to be valid, then we can consider the individual actor within this system of authority as legitimate if he or she is a functioning, obeying, normative subject. As a 'good' immigrant, Hans seems to be on the right side of this idea of legitimation — he subscribes to normative modes of being in the state, and as such he both legitimizes it while he himself is made legitimate. Even given the bureaucratic debacle that

angers him in the DMV — an error on his green card means that he cannot get his licence — Hans never considers the possibility of *not* correcting an administrative error so that he can drive legally. If anything, he chooses to submit to the law and continue to be a legitimate subject, even when it is most difficult. He writes of his eventual return to the realm of the legal and proper: “I *duly* received a corrected green card, which *enabled* me to return to the DMV to collect my *learner permit*, which left, as *officialdom’s* final hurdle between me and a driving test, a *compulsory* presentation on road safety” (116-117, italics mine). Hans continually prostrates himself before the authority of the state, confirming his sense of legitimacy. Not only is he the ideal economic actor, he is always willingly subservient to the concepts of law and citizenship.

The difference between the authentic and the legitimate, in my formulation, is also related to Marx’s idea of alienation. In it, a subject is alienated from their humanity because they are only a tool of labour, and can only express their humanity through production. As Marx puts it, “our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature” (34). Both Hans and Chuck seem to seek their lack in the other, reflecting the ways in which alienation expresses itself through different ethnic identities and economic conditions. Chuck, in Hans’s view, is more immediate in his being, less divorced from the product of his labour: Chuck’s dream to build a cricket empire has him literally planting grass and tilling soil. His other businesses involve meeting people, driving around the city, shaking hands, and using violence to terrorize those who do not comply with his wishes. Combined with his dark skin, his aphoristic speech, and his Trinidadian passport, Chuck’s labour means he is tethered to the city, he is authentic — and he gives the novel, in Smith’s estimation, its postcolonial sheen, a facade of worldliness. Authenticity, it seems, functions as an essentializing form of identity for the racial

immigrant other — in it I read a form of reduction, as this authenticity is commodified and consumed by those in power, in this case it is the figure of Hans who can trade on the access to the idea of a “real” experience of the city that Chuck can offer.

Hans, in contrast, is an elite oil-trader who lives in a Chelsea hotel and flies to London twice a month to be with his family. There is the sense that Hans is estranged from a sense of *being* in the city, while his high-powered position allows him unlimited access to it. For Hans, the product of his work is one seemingly beyond his own comprehension. He develops a reputation as an equities guru, and he “too became a beneficiary of the phenomenon, because the suddenly sunken price of a barrel of oil — it went down to ten bucks that year — helped create an unparalleled demand for seers in my line” (91). His labour verges on the esoteric, even in his own understanding of it. His obsession with cricket and with Chuck are, it seems, a way to leverage his legitimacy towards something like Chuck’s authenticity. In a simple sense, authenticity is lived identity, whereas legitimacy is conferred upon the bourgeois subject. Cricket — with O’Neill’s romantic descriptions of batting technique and summer days — seems to return Hans to both his childhood and the realm of the physical. While Hans is the legitimized immigrant, there is still “a great anxiety about the depth or otherwise of the soul in question...”; “is the reader suggesting that white middle-class futures traders are less authentic, less capable of interiority than anyone else?” asks Smith (75-76). O’Neill answers Smith’s question with “yes.” Chuck is then not merely exoticized, but rather an entry into the authentic precisely because he is not, as is the case with Hans, a legitimate immigrant into the world of New York City. Chuck’s authenticity is not just a matter of labour, but intrinsically tied to his ethnicity, an immigrant who can talk of iguana curries and Caribbean superstitions without, it seems, the crippling angst of

Hans and his sense of dislocation in the city. The novel, therefore, is caught between Hans's legitimacy — something Chuck attempts to leverage to his economic advantage throughout the novel — and Chuck's authenticity — which Hans attempts to use to give him a more immediate experience of the city. The experience of the city is thus not merely determined by racial difference; instead, racial difference shapes the ways in which they are able to operate in the city in relation to each other. Chuck, for example, introduces Hans to his friends and business partners (all are other immigrants) as "Hans van den Broek, of M—— Bank" (137). In a reciprocal (though asymmetrical) way therefore, Hans too is a commodity to be exchanged in this human economy in which he and Chuck deal. Similarly, when Hans needs to practice driving for his licensing test, it is Chuck who offers him a car. In exchange, Hans chauffeurs Chuck around the city to his various illicit meetings.

Superficially, Smith's critique touches on my own broader concern in this thesis: that the racialized body offers a way into reading the city that is not otherwise apparent in the normative image of the city and its citizens. It is possible to read Smith's critique that O'Neill trades in the racialized immigrant's "authenticity" to sell the novel as more political and worldly than it actually is. Yet to argue that the racialized body is a marker of authenticity is to assume that this racial identity is *fixed*. Furthermore, the narrative structure of *Netherland* means that Chuck's authenticity — his function in the narrative — is to serve as a point of access for Hans into the city's immigrant culture. The idea of authenticity, as Smith argues, is not for the racialized figure himself. Whiteness is always the centre around which authenticity must operate. The racialized body destabilizes white normativity in the city, not through a claim to authenticity, but through physical experience. When considered in concert with the death of the racialized body, as I do in

the next section, *Netherland* limits the possibilities for the racialized immigrant to exercise agency in the city.

2.3 DEATH AND CITIZENSHIP

“It’s the case that a person’s premature death brings him into view” (O’Neill, 131). The submersion of Chuck’s body in the Gowanus canal both hides his body from view, while the novel simultaneously takes his death as its central motivating concern. It is a dynamic that echoes Smith’s earlier critique: that the racialized body is something to be utilized for other ends — for Hans’s quest for authenticity, or the novel’s central investigation into his years adrift in the United States. Again, the body of Chuck Ramkissoon is the narrative logic that underpins the rest of the novel. In this section I want to explore the ways in which the racialized body is subjected to violence within the city, and suggest that the novel demonstrates the concept of necropolitics as articulated by Mbembe. I then consider how concepts of death and mobility might be related within the city and in *Netherland*.

Mbembe argues, as influenced by Foucault, that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11). He therefore moves the idea of sovereignty away from its traditional basis in reason, and to what he considers the realm of the “less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death” (14). While much of his analysis concerns the exercise of this power by the state, I want to narrow my focus on this expression of sovereignty as exercised by the global city over the racialized immigrant body. If we consider the city as both an agent of the state — subject to and

enforcing its laws, norms and procedures — and, as its transnational, neoliberal ideal — a centre for the flow of capital, information, and labour — then the city can still operate with necropolitical power over its inhabitants. One such inhabitant is Chuck Ramkissoon. It is partly this exercise of sovereignty that is demonstrated in the life and death of Chuck, whose body animates the narrative of the novel, and whose presence grants authenticity to Hans's New York City.

That Chuck is a racialized immigrant subject to the sovereign power of death is not merely coincidence or historical happenstance, but rather it is intrinsic to the concept of necropolitics. As Mbembe puts it, “race has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over foreign peoples...” (17). The role of race is to legitimize sovereignty over foreign territory and people, making race a precondition for the right to exercise the power of death. In the case of *Netherland*, of course, the territory is not a foreign one, but rather the space of the global city which contains both the normative — signified by Hans in the novel — and the transgressive — signified by Chuck. On the contradictory presence and absence of the role of race in Western thought: “Arendt locates their roots in the shattering experience of otherness and suggests that the politics of race is ultimately linked to the politics of death” (Mbembe 17). Foucault writes that the racial other is “is a race that is permanently, ceaselessly infiltrating the social body, or which is, rather, constantly being re-created in and by the social fabric” (61). Both death and race are the underlying, ghostly structures upon which the city is built, and the “[p]olitical economy is an economy of death, because it economizes on death and buries it under its discourse” (Baudrillard

139). Race, it seems, is thus deeply imbricated in the question of both death and sovereignty. In the question of who can live and who must die, the presence of the other is a primary decider.

This is the space in which we find the body of Chuck Ramkissoon. If the mere existence of the other is “an attempt on my life,” then the presence of Chuck is an existential threat to the city itself (18). While the city relies on the racialized immigrant for labour, Chuck’s criminal activity makes his form of labour a threat rather than a commodity. Chuck does not serve the city in one of the roles prescribed by the state. Instead his illegal gambling syndicate sees him thrive, and ultimately die, in a shadow, criminal version of the city. Mbembe shows that, to be living in the space of the colony, concentration camp, or slave plantation, is to be living in a state of exception, in which death is not an aberration, but the constant. While less extreme, I want to suggest that the novel relies on the idea that Chuck cannot remain alive in the city, not as long as he transgresses prescribed modes of being. For him to exist in the city, he must always be subject to death: it is death-as-being.

Chuck attempts to exercise a certain form of agency throughout the novel, but that this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful precisely because of the conditions of race and death that make the city viable. Our introduction to Chuck directly addresses his attempt to engage with agency by acceding to notions of law and propriety. We, along with Hans, meet Chuck when he defuses a potentially violent exchange on the cricket pitch. Here the threat of death is very immediate: a handgun is brought out after a dispute over a wicket. The incongruity of the handgun is shocking, both for its place in a seemingly benign game, and because of what cricket is thought to represent. It is also, on a more basic level, a challenge to the state, which holds a monopoly over violence. This sport, with its roots in English aristocracy and its modern passions in South Asian and Caribbean diasporas, is one that Chuck insists on holding up as a form of

law, of legitimacy. “We have an expression in the English language,” Chuck says after the incident, “The expression is ‘not cricket.’ When we disapprove of something, we say ‘It’s not cricket’” (14). This sense of decorum is tightly bound to the game of cricket, with its immaculate lawns, white uniforms and tea-breaks. In Chuck’s mind it is also bound up in the question of belonging:

We are playing this game in the United States. This is a difficult environment for us. We play where we can, wherever they let us...if we step out of line, believe me, this indulgence disappears... We have to let our hosts see that these strange-looking guys are up to something worthwhile... It’s like we’re invisible. Now that’s nothing new for those of us who are black or brown” (15-16).

This monologue suggests a desperate attempt to submit to the power of the state in the hope for legitimation. Inherent in Chuck’s appeal is the notion that violence, the right to kill, is an inalienable right of the state and that to impinge on that right is to lose claims of citizenship. This is exacerbated by the fact that black and brown bodies are invisible until death makes them visible to the normative city. A few pages later Hans asks after Chuck’s origins. Chuck insists he is from “Here... The United States” (17). It is only after his girlfriend intervenes that we confirm what Hans, Chuck, and we as readers already know: he is a Caribbean immigrant, from Trinidad. In a kind of sporting transubstantiation, Chuck’s attempt at civility — both in the sense of being a civilian and behaving according to a set of preset expectations — is tied to a very colonial

legacy, of Britain to the Americas. He attempts to turn the colonial legacy of British civilization into a postcolonial form of legitimacy. The introduction of Hans into Chuck's life allows for an even longer legacy of colonial civilization — back to the early 17th century. Chuck fails to alert the wider American public, and New Yorkers in particular, to its colonial legacy through the game of cricket. His attempt to do so is predicated on the fact that he, and those like him, already have access to the sport — and that alone ought to be enough to ingratiate them into the city and its history. His naïveté leads him to believe that mere evidence of its history ought to be enough to gain acceptance in his adopted home. While the novel suggests that it is Chuck's illegal gambling syndicate — also a West Indian import — that has him murdered, one can read his inability to communicate his love for cricket into a sense of belonging in the city as a failure of citizenship, of being a subject.

Death-as-being in the city has its corollary, which is not life in a general sense, but rather the promise of mobility as a form of resistance. Both death, in Mbembe's necropolitical sense, and mobility, in my argument below, allow for resistance to the normative city. I continue to argue, however, that *Netherland* offers glimpses of these forms of resistance before foreclosing them in a narrative that reaffirms the dominant ideologies of the city. In the final part of this chapter I want to consider the ways in which the stasis of death — Chuck's body, bound in the canal — can be considered alongside the vulnerability of flaneurie, or the dissociation of the plane or car.

2.4 MOBILITY AS DISTANCE AND ACCESS

I would like to suggest, as a way of bringing *Netherland* into conversation with *Open City*, that forms of mobility provide important perspectives on race and belonging. What is proffered in *Netherland*, I argue, is a spatial and phenomenological experience of the city that is predicated on distance, separation, and speed; the technology of mobility in the text is a form of uncoupling the body from the experience of the city. The novel is casually transatlantic: characters fly between New York and London every fortnight, to India, and to Las Vegas. Aeroplanes represent both connection and rupture for Hans — with the trauma of 9/11 leading to the temporary dissolution of his family, and his frequent trips to London an attempt to reconcile that initial rupture. Whilst in New York, Hans is determined, for reasons unknown to him, to drive a car. As noted in my first chapter, to be a pedestrian is to be exposed to a “foul mechanical dark,” “seemingly bottomless gutter pools” and “unjust, indifferent powers” (68). It is to be subject to the violence of the city, against which Hans is otherwise protected. Hans is drawn instead to the swift, dissociating experience of the modern. This is part of a broader political ambivalence in the text, an ambivalence that both O’Neill and the protagonist acknowledge. An example comes midway through the text. Chuck tells Hans of the Dutch history of the Brooklyn neighbourhood they find themselves in: “‘This entire region,’ Chuck said, ‘everything for miles and miles around, all of it was Dutch farmland. Until just two hundred years ago. Your people,’” (154). This is a history that Hans refuses to engage with: “What was one supposed to do with such information?” he asks, “I had no idea what to feel or what to think, no idea, in short, of what I might do to discharge the obligation of remembrance that fixed itself to one in this anomalous

place, which offered so little shade from the incomprehensible rays of the past” (154). This ambivalence goes further. On the Iraq War, Hans states, “I didn’t really care. In short, I was a political-ethical idiot” (100). Contrasting his work to that of Chuck’s, Hans says: “I’m an analyst — a bystander. I lack entrepreneurial wistfulness” (103). There seems to be a commentary on Hans’s particular brand of deliberate political and historical ignorance, and it is one that circles back to the question of both mobility and authenticity. When rejecting an engagement with the history of Brooklyn, or the imminent invasion of Iraq, Hans notes “it had quite recently struck me with force that I did not want to join the New York dead” (154-155). The cemetery he walks is a “necropolitan replica of the Manhattan skyline”(155). This reminder of this death is sparked by his experience of walking, a morbid flaneurie that can only show the violence of history and the vulnerability of his own body. His preference for transport that removes him from the city seems to be a way of avoiding death.

Instead of exposing himself to this fear, and indeed confronting his own complicity in the violence of the city as a part of a long colonial history, Hans takes to the automobile with Chuck. Here again we find Hans attempting to access something resembling authenticity through both Chuck and the Cadillac they use to traverse the city. The experience is one of encountering otherness, but always from a distance. The descriptions become safari-like, a form of limited racial tourism, a list of essential identities — and the existence of otherness seems a surprise to Hans:

I became familiar with the topical sights: the chiming, ceaselessly peregrinating ice-cream truck, driven by a Turk; the Muslim funeral home on Albemarle Road out of which

watchful African-American men spilled in sunglasses and black suits; the Hispanic gardeners working on the malls... (152)

Their trip to Coney Island produces a similar catalogue of difference of racial tourism: “assorted small businesses proclaiming provenances from Pakistan, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Armenia, Ghana, the Jewry, Christendom, Islam” (146). In another scene, seeing “Arabs, West Africans, African Americans” leads Hans to think “I might have been in a cold Senegal” (69). It is a taxonomic perspective on the city that is so Eurocentric in its narrowness — of which kinds of bodies may constitute the city and which must be foreign — that it is nearly comical. One is reminded here of Fanon’s talk of his identity being fixed, predetermined, by his race. Hans’s refusal to engage with the history of the city, his proud status as a political-ethical idiot, seems to be superficially balanced by the vision of racialized others. It seems to be merely that — a glimpse or a vision — without the ethical implications of being a witness. Merely acknowledging the existence of racial and national diversity seems to stand as a suitable simulation of the postcolonial experience.

The kind of distance we experience between Hans and the city is only confirmed by Hans’s constant attempts to escape New York. Travelling to London is “flying high into the atmosphere, over boundless massifs of vapour or small clouds dispersed like the droppings of Pegasus on an unseen platform of air, [that] might also lift me above my personal haze” (38). It is further abstracted from the physical interaction with space: “flying on Google’s satellite function, night after night I surreptitiously travelled to England... It was always a clear and beautiful

day... the scene was depthless” (124). Even the final image of the novel — of Hans and his family is reunited — takes its ultimate form of happiness as distance from the city (London, now). On the London Eye, he notes “the higher we go, the less recognizable the city becomes” (254). It is notable that London holds none of the existential or postcolonial angst for Hans. It is a place that is seemingly accessed through planes, satellites and enormous Ferris wheels. For a novel celebrated as a postcolonial meditation on the broken, post 9/11 global centre, the narrative point of view shows very little interest in actually *being* in the city itself. The body of Chuck Ramkissoon still remains an object of mild interest for the text, a thing upon which a narrative can be built, but one that chooses not to look too closely at the city, nor its people. But it is also the object that can be discarded once its utility is exhausted.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Netherland gestures towards a vision of the city that takes the racialized immigrant body as a means for interrogating the historic, social, economic, and racial structures of the city. Instead, I have argued, it is only superficially interested in this kind of engagement. *Netherland* attempts to deploy the racialized body as a marker of authentic being, a rhetorical marker that is aimed at the protagonist and the reader. Questions of race and nation in New York City are raised, but always dismissed. Chuck talks about his attempts to build his cricket stadium in the central part of the city, for example he complains “There was no way they’re going to let a bunch of black guys take over prime Manhattan real estate,” he complains at one point (79). The novel allows for this question to be asked, but the ultimate answer is always the same: the image of Chuck’s body in the canal. As I have argued, one of the ways in which this perspective is

affirmed is through the novel's valorization of certain modes of navigating the physical world — the car and taxi in the city, the transatlantic plane, and satellite image — and the inherent fear of the *body* in the city. The character that is embodied in the city, that of the racialized immigrant, is ultimately punished for that very reason. In the next part of my thesis, I would like to consider Teju Cole's *Open City* as a text that shares many spatial and racial qualities and concerns with *Netherland*. It too takes a post-9/11 New York City as both setting and object of inquiry, and it too considers the implications of race and colonial history in the novel. *Open City* argues that the black body can offer far more in terms of radical critique of the city, and that an embodied form of mobility is itself an opportunity for this experience.

3. Chapter Three: *Open City*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In my previous chapter, I suggested that Joseph O’Neill’s engagement with the racialized immigrant figure was problematic, in both narrative and political terms. While it offered the possibility for disruption — of the city and its normative conditions for existing within it — through its engagement with the racialized figure, both its narrative structure and its protagonist engage in a limited racial tourism that only gestures towards critical engagement with the city. In this final chapter I want to argue that Teju Cole’s 2011 novel *Open City* uses devices similar to those of *Netherland* — the cosmopolitan and ethically ambivalent city-dweller, post-9/11 New York, the racialized body — but manages to suggest the ways in which the city can be reread, challenged, and perhaps even changed. *Open City*, like *Netherland*, was also praised on publication. As a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, it occupies a similar position in the New York literary scene in both its subject matter and its reception. Since its publication, Cole has become a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, and is now the photography critic for the *New York Times*. Both *Netherland* and *Open City*, therefore, share the city as a central concern, while also being praised for their respective engagements with New York in a post-9/11

I would like to reconsider part of Franz Fanon’s critique of the black colonized subject in the metropole, and his argument that the “black man who has lived in France for a certain time returns home radically transformed” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 3). I would like to consider a

corollary to Fanon's claim, and consider the relationship between the damaged psyche of the black protagonist and his ability to radically read the Western city: how does the black man, away from home, radically transform that space? I do not argue that *Open City*, and especially its protagonist, offers a righteous critique. Instead, there is an ambivalence toward history, memory, and trauma that is indeed quite troubling in the novel. Furthermore the novel is sceptical about the value of the aesthetic experience as it relates to the broader project of modern cosmopolitanism. What I do suggest, however, is that it is precisely this ambivalence, in conjunction with the racialized body and its forms of mobility, that offers glimpses of the city from a potentially radical perspective.

I would like to begin with a consideration of how walking the city figures into modes of reading the environment, and show the interaction between the physical and the psychic in relation to the flaneur. Secondly, the phenomenon of memory, and specifically amnesia, is a trope that affects both the city and the protagonist in the text. I consider the ways in which this process both facilitates and limits an engagement with the city. Thirdly, the related idea of spatial-temporal dislocation is considered, before my final consideration of the ways in which the dialectic of blindness and insight might be a productive form of psychic crisis.

3.2 THE BLACK FLANEUR AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Open City begins with a description of its protagonist as he takes to walking the city: "And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city" (3). Along with this immediate concern with mobility is a positioning of the still unidentified narrator: Morningside Heights — where he works as a

psychiatry resident — is home to Columbia University, and a predominately white and well-off population (“Morningside Heights”). Harlem lies a few blocks to the east, a seemingly separate world where “traffic makes the river on the other side of the trees inaudible” (3). When he claims “New York City worked itself into [his] life at walking pace,” Julius constructs a relationship between self and geography that deliberately blurs distinctions of psychic and physical (3). It is also geography that gives readers the first hint of Julius’ race. The highly segregated nature of the city means that when Julius walks through Harlem on his way home, he can identify as black merely through his physical location: “In the Harlem night, there were no whites” (*Open City* 18). Race, therefore, enters the novel through the physical act of walking: it is through a socio-geographical understanding of the city that one aspect of Julius’s identity, his race, is revealed. It is through the evocation of “Morningside Heights” that we learn something about his economic and class position too. The city, from the start of the novel, does not exist only to *be* revealed, but it is engaged in the act of revealing as well. The novel thus has the related concerns of mobility, race, and the city at its centre, while it also seems to suggest the complications of reading this relationship.

What is also immediately apparent in the novel is a scholarly, perhaps even encyclopedic, concern with both the hidden historical record of the city in conjunction with extended meditations on art. The consequence of Cole’s insistence on flaneurie is an engagement with both the historical and the aesthetic, and a deliberate blurring of the lines between those two categories. Julius says of his nights spent reading: “Sometimes, I even spoke the words in the book out loud to myself, and doing so I noticed the odd way my voice mingled with the murmur of the French, German or Dutch radio announcers, or with the thin texture of the violin strings of

the orchestras...” (5). The sound of these European languages is foreign to him, but despite their incomprehensibility he finds solace in them. In what he calls a “sonic fugue”— evoking both the musical counterpoint and the psychiatric condition that involves both physical and mental dissociation — Julius goes on to consider, in a dry academic sense, an anecdote about St. Ambrose’s attempt to read without moving his lips. “It does seem an odd thing — it strikes me now as it did then — that we can comprehend words without voicing them... We have for too long been taught that the sight of a man speaking to himself is a sign of eccentricity or madness; we are no longer at all habituated to our own voices, except in conversation or from within the safety of a shouting crowd” (5). Voice seems to be the subject of dissociation: both his own voice and that of others are dissonant, and it is a dissonance inspired by an experience of classical European music. Julius’s knowledge of classical music and art is prodigious, and a brief experience of hearing Mahler in a record store can inspire a long history of the piece in question. The idea of dissociation is not one of confusion, necessarily, but comes in spite of his deep knowledge of the subject matter. There are several important concerns at play here: what is the relationship between the aesthetic (the book, the music) and the physical (the act of sounding out language), and between the personal (the voice) and the communal (the shouting crowd)?

The invocation of the flaneur is no accident, nor is Cole’s engagement with the literary figure’s critical position in the literature of the city: Walter Benjamin — the foremost theorist of the flaneur — is explicitly referenced later in the novel (103). However, it is not *The Arcades Project* that his Moroccan acquaintance mentions (Benjamin’s famously unfinished work, in which he mulls the historical place of the flaneur), but rather a text on *On the Concept of History*. Benjamin seems to exist in the text both through its implicit embrace of flaneurie, while also

through its reconsideration of how history is conceptualized. Benjamin critiques the traditional Marxist perspective on history. It is not enough to give agency to the dialectal movement of history, he argues, but rather there is a far more complex, and perhaps disturbing view of history in his essay. The “angel of history” does not look back and see a chain of events, he writes, but rather sees “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin, 2005) Walking in the city, Julius moves between his role as the detached bourgeois flaneur and a version of the “angel of history” as seen in *On the Concept of History*. For Benjamin, as well as Julius and those he encounters, “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” It is this state of emergency that the racialized figure—Julius, but also those he meets—finds himself.

Throughout the novel, Julius’s walking connects him to these people who seem to have an innate grasp of complex political and philosophical ideas, even when they are from unexpected sources: the Moroccan internet-cafe owner, or the Earth Sciences professor who reads Badiou and is a jazz aficionado. His world seems to be filled with these unexpected founts of knowledge, who are often outside the academy and found through walking the city and happenstance. These seemingly disconnected encounters, I would argue, constitute a version of Benjamin’s assemblage, a collection of historical detritus, parts of the catastrophe of history.

Cole further emphasizes the idea of dislocation and mobility. “Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them” (6). Later he writes, “Each neighbourhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a

different air pressure, a different psychic weight... My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city..." (6-7). Here we see the mental process which flaneurie inspires for Julius: the physical, historical experience of the city (the socio-economic difference between the adjacent neighbourhoods of Harlem and Morningside Heights is stark, for example) is made indistinct, and then rendered in the language of art. It is a collapsing of boundaries that is consistent with the novel's method of engagement and perplexing in broader political terms.

With this focus on the flaneur, Cole begins with what seems to be a familiar checklist of talking points. As Pieter Vermeulen writes, "*Open City* can easily be read as a magisterial display of literature's enabling role in fostering cosmopolitan feeling and understanding" (41). The act of flaneurie, it seems, is still bound to the 19th century idea of the "leisurely wanderer who was acutely attentive to the spectacle provided by the processes of commodification and urbanization that surrounded him," while Vermeulen also acknowledges the critique of the figure, an "aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them, the *flaneur* can be — and has been — condemned as a fatally bourgeois figure attempting to reprivatize public space" (41). What Vermeulen proceeds to argue is that *Open City* engages with the figure of the flaneur, and in doing so it "interrogates rather than celebrates such literary cosmopolitanism" (42). I want to argue that the novel's critical view of the cosmopolitan wanderer is one that still offers the chance for a critique of the city from within it, while it consciously refuses to allow that critique to remain unexamined. As Vermeulen states, "*Open City* insistently denies its readers the illusion that imaginative transports can stand in for real

global change,” and “forcefully reminds its readers that empathy and intercultural understanding *alone* cannot achieve the changes to which cosmopolitanism is committed,” it simultaneously suggests a form of engagement that can still counteract the forms of historical amnesia that the text seeks to disrupt (42). While acknowledging Vermeulen’s reading, I believe that *Open City* suggests the dangers inherent in confusing the historical and the artistic, while also arguing that this confusion is a productive process when uncovering the hidden narratives of the city.

3.3 CITY AND AMNESIA

Cole consistently reminds the reader of the violence that has built Western modernity, a violence that is expressed most strongly in the palimpsestic city. His critique is one focused around the deliberate act of forgetting: the city is constantly in the process of erasing its horrific, racist past in favour of promoting capital and its image as a global city. When Julius walks past an immigration office in a federal office, he sees what “seemed to be an immigration crowd, as opposed to a jury-duty crowd,” an assumption based on the racial demographics of the crowd (218). They surround an AT&T building, once again reminding the reader of the relationship between race, citizenship, and the violence of the city’s history. After he observes the families outside the building, he continues walking until he sees a “curious shape — sculpture or architecture” that alerts him to the fact that he now stood on what was once the “site of an African burial ground... But most of the burial ground was now under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government” (220). Here it is the presence of the sculpture that, despite the quotidian hum and its minimal presence,

alerts Julius to the death that this site once represented. Standing on what had once been a burial ground for “the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves” Julius notes that “the land had been built over and the people of the city had forgotten that it was a burial ground. It had passed into private and civic ownership” (220). The implication, therefore, is not only that massive death can be so easily forgotten, but that private and civic ownership is built on that process of forgetting.

Even where violence is remembered — at the site of the World Trade Centre attacks of September 11, 2001 for example — it is at the expense of other forms of suffering. The building of the Twin Towers, Julius reminds us, pushed out Christian Syrian and Lebanese communities that had been there since the 1800s. The city, for its continued economic and political growth, must forget certain forms of suffering while commemorating others. Atrocity, Julius claims, is now “uniquely well organized, carried out with pens, train carriages, ledgers, barbed wire, work camps, gas. And this late contribution, the absence of bodies” (58). The reference to “pens” is of course ambiguous — it speaks to literature and to animal slaughter, once again invoking the symbolic violence in which art can participate, but that it can also force us to recognize.

Yet this is a process not unique to the city, Cole argues, but it is evident in the cosmopolitan elite that Julius represents as well. Some of these acts of forgetting are seemingly banal, but they inspire a kind of existential crisis in Julius. On his way to meet with his accountant, Julius first forgets his chequebook and then cannot remember his ATM PIN. He can only remember the number “2046,” which he recognizes as the title of a Wong Kar Wai film — once again, the confusion between art and capital is present, even in the act of forgetting. The text is littered with these acts of amnesia. When he meets Moji, the sister of a childhood friend,

he cannot remember her. “She said a bright hello, waved, and addressed me by my full name, smiling. It was clear she expected me to remember her. I didn’t,” (156). These seemingly small cases of memory loss begin to pile up, and eventually suggest a sinister aspect of the cosmopolitan.

Throughout the novel, Julius is confronted with the idea that his blackness is a marker of diasporic connection — a connection that he explicitly rejects. As he tries to forget his own past and identity he cannot but be reminded of his race by those who wish to identify with him. Fanon’s anecdote about his blackness overdetermining his being-for-others is again evident, but not only for the white observer, but for the black diaspora as well. Irritable after waiting for a taxi in the rain, he climbs into one driven by an African immigrant (only the continent is mentioned, a deliberate elision of nation in favour of blackness). He is momentarily distracted, thinking of the portraits he has encountered at the American Folk Art Museum. Ironically, he is distracted by the idea of deafness in the exhibition he has just seen while he ignores the driver until he snaps awake. When he asks “how are you doing, my brother?” the driver chastises Julius: “Not good, not good at all, you know the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I’m African just like you, why do you do this?” (40). Julius is unhappy about this accusation: “I wasn’t sorry at all,” he confesses to us, “I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me” (40). Here again we see Cole’s refusal to conflate the aesthetic with the political. Julius rejects the lived reality of the city around him for the aesthetic; he can be caught in the revelry inspired by art while ignoring those that represent the undesirable immigrant. What Cole is engaged with is a thorough critique of the mobile class, the cosmopolitan global citizen, even as that citizen is engaged in a critique of the city. No one, Cole seems to argue, is without

the blemish of modernity's violence. It is an act of erasure or deliberate amnesia that is common to the settler state. Sunera Thobani writes about the idea of the complicit immigrant in *Exalted Subjects*: the "more immigrants have sought their own inclusion and access to citizenship, the more invested they have become, with very few exceptions, in supporting the nation's erasure of its originary violence" (16). Thobani's reference is to the real and symbolic violence done to indigenous communities in North America, but I believe the novel suggests that this trend is a more diffuse process. In this case, Julius must make sure to differentiate himself from the less desirable black body in the city. Julius, as the elite mobile wanderer, fits normative ways of being in the city in the moment when he dismisses the taxi driver's accusation.

The claims of "African-ness" might annoy Julius, but he is accused of far greater crimes. Throughout the novel Julius is something of a silent observer, noting the historical and the aesthetic influences on the spaces he inhabits without abandoning his scholarly tone, and yet almost never offers an impassioned opinion. The closest he gets is when he encounters two young Arab intellectuals in Brussels. Talking about the War on Terror, one acquaintance condemns the attacks of 9/11, but says "I understand why they did it" (120). Julius's response is telling: "Your friend is an extremist," he tells Farouq, a brilliant but frustrated young Moroccan he has met (120). But to the reader he admits he was "pretending to an outrage greater than [he] actually felt. In the game, if it was a game, [he] was meant to be the outraged American, though what [he] felt was more sorrow and less anger" (120). This is the closest Julius gets to offering an actual opinion in the novel, and even that is tempered by the idea that he must play a role — one that Thobani argues is part of a broader pattern of immigrant assimilation. In a continual fugue

state, Julius seems to suffer from a deliberate, selective amnesia while he refuses to offer anything polemical.

It is both shocking and predictable, therefore, that when Julius is accused of rape by Moji — when they were teenagers in Nigeria — he not only fails to remember the violence he has enacted, but he does not even offer anything approaching an apology, defence, or explanation. Moji not only accuses him of rape, but of a deliberate act of forgetting: “in the weeks that followed, in the months and years that followed, I [Julius] had acted like I knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when we met again, and had never tried to acknowledge what I had done” (244). Moji’s entire accusation is only told in reported speech by Julius, further emphasizing the way in which she has been silenced, forgotten. She tells him how she felt possessed by his violence: “the luxury of denial had not been possible for her” and Julius was “ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar” (244). Even though Julius had forgotten, his actions were a constant lived memory for Moji. Instead of commenting on the accusation, Julius ruminates on an anecdote about Camus, who tells a story about both Nietzsche and Gaius Mucius Cordus Scaevola, a sixth century Roman soldier. Both men, according to Camus, burn their own hands to prove their convictions. Yet, with a sense of inevitability, Julius misremembers the anecdote. Nietzsche does not pick up a hot coal, as Julius remembers, but rather a few matchsticks that are quickly knocked out of his hand. If Julius attempts to make a connection between self-inflicted harm and conviction, his memory fails to allow for this story to have anything like the gravitas he assumes it would.

The fact that Cole refers to Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* more than once is a deliberate comment on this idea of the compromised critic, in both an intellectual and personal

sense. Julius's meeting with Farouq in Brussels — who speaks at least four languages and who dares offer opinions on the world — presents a difficult challenge to Julius's conception of the role of the cosmopolitan figure. Farouq tells Julius: "I am sure you know what Paul de Man says about insight and blindness. His theory has to do with an insight that can actually obscure other things, that can be a blindness. And the reverse, also, how what seems blind can open up possibilities" (127). What Cole seems to suggest here is not just that rationality has blinded us to the divine (as Farouq reads de Man) but that we need to reconsider the interaction between the personal and the political, the individual and society.

In the late 1980s, after his death, de Man was outed as a Nazi sympathizer and was accused of forging many of his credentials and entering the United States illegally after World War II ("The Case of Paul de Man", James Atlas, 1988). The controversy, according to Atlas's article, threw not only de Man's legacy into question, but so too the entire field of deconstructive literary theory. Cole's references to de Man, along with the explicit mention of his writing on blindness and insight, raises a more complex consideration of the role of personal complicity in historical violence. Should the intellectual work carried out by de Man — or indeed the work that Julius does throughout the novel — be reconsidered in the light of what we now know? The novel is ambivalent, and Cole's cynicism around the role of the cosmopolitan flaneur is certainly valid. Yet the role of the racialized immigrant in the city is still an important and potentially destabilizing one, especially when considered in conjunction with the disorientation of walking the city.

3.4 URBAN DISORIENTATION

Throughout this project I have argued that the racialized immigrant flaneur figure has the potential to offer a radical critique of the global city. Thus far I have shown that potential in *Netherland* is unfulfilled because of its broader political and narrative constructions: its engagement with racial otherness serves only the elite, mobile, white protagonist at its centre., and its narrative relies on the death of the racial other to animate its story. *Open City*, meanwhile, further complicates this argument by deconstructing its protagonist's own complicity in the violence that the city represents. Here I contend that in spite of — or perhaps even due to — this complicity, the novel still manages to consider the interplay of the aesthetic and the historical to uncover and critique the city.

Throughout the novel, Cole employs a form of narrative collapse: historical time and subjective experience become one. A painting or piece of music does not so much inspire Julius as it does discombobulate him. His walking is also a practice of finding himself lost. In Vermeulen's reading of the novel, this dissociation is evidence of Julius' role as a *fugueur* rather than the more celebrated *flaneur*. Vermeulen writes that *fugueurs* "emerged in urban areas in France at the end of the nineteenth century; they were 'mad travelers' [sic] who unaccountably walked away from their lives and, when found, were unable to remember what had happened on these trips" (42). He subsequently argues that "*Open City* insistently denies its readers the illusion that imaginative transports can stand in for real global change. It forcefully reminds its readers that empathy and intercultural understanding *alone* cannot achieve the changes to which cosmopolitanism is committed, and that they can only point readers to the world outside — to a

global landscape riven by injustice and inequality” (42). I think that this argument constructs an idealistic expectation of what the cosmopolitan entails. Instead of claiming that the experience of the flaneur has the power to solve “a global landscape riven by injustice and inequality” — a mammoth task that no one seems to be claiming — I want to suggest that these moments of fugue, if we use Vermeulen’s reading, in the novel allow for a recontextualisation of the city, a challenge to standard narratives of historical development. Art, empathy, and intercultural understanding are but pieces in this process, and not simple solutions as Vermeulen suggests the cosmopolitan ideal must be. Vermeulen insists we focus on the limits of literary cosmopolitanism in the text — reminding us, as Cole does, that it cannot solve the world’s big problems. Yet I think this reading still leaves to consider what exactly it is that literary cosmopolitanism *can* do. Its claims need not be large, but are still worth considering.

One of the key characteristic of the novel’s engagement with the city is the rejection of simple relationships between the *now* and the *then* of linear history, and a refusal to subscribe to a *here* and *there* of geography. It is this refusal to disaggregate these concepts that suggests the novel’s engagement with history and aesthetics may be more troubling than it may otherwise seem. One of the ways in which this spatial-temporal collapse is triggered is by the act of flaneurie, which Cole reminds us, is linked to Julius’s amnesia. In many cases, this state of walking amnesia is fortuitous for Julius: caught in a winter rain, he notes that the “intensity of the rain blurred my sight, a phenomenon [he] had noticed before only with snowstorms, when a blizzard erased the most obvious signs of the times, leaving one unable to guess which century it was” (36). To be exposed to the elements is also to be cast adrift in historical time. When he tries to escape the rain, Julius again seems to engage in an act of subconscious wayfaring. “When I

turned around,” he says, “I saw that I was at the entryway of the American Folk Art Museum. Never having visited before, I went in” (36). Again, once in the museum, Julius has the experience of being unmoored in time when he enters a section dedicated to the paintings of John Brewster: “The sense of having wandered into the past was complete once I reached the third floor of the museum” (36). It is precisely in this state of both geographical and historical disorientation that leads to some of the novel’s most compelling mediations, and Julius’s most egregious acts of contempt for those around him. Comparing cultural connotations of blindness and deafness, he manages to tie Brewster’s development of American Sign Language to Homer, and then consider the Yoruba considerations of the spiritual power of the blind. Julius claims to have “imagined that [he] had seen something like an aura around, a spiritual apartness” around a blind man who would sing in Julius’s native language (38). These moments of revelation, about the ways in which human connection expresses itself between modern Nigeria and colonial America, between blindness and deafness, are the result of dislocation, are a product of the meandering walking of the immigrant in a city that is decidedly not his own. Cole, however, does not allow Julius — nor the reader — to assume that this moment is unconnected to the material world that Julius must still navigate. It is once he leaves this museum that he ignores the taxi driver (an episode noted above), suggesting that his flaneurie can be both expository while simultaneously a pleasure reserved for the elite. It is de Man’s insight followed immediately by blindness.

This anxiety percolates through the novel, and reveals itself in Julius’s professional capacity. Julius describes the work of a patient of his, a historian of early European colonization of the area, and the genocidal violence enacted against Native Americans. “[It] was clear, too,

from talking to her that the horrors Native Americans had had to endure at the hands of the white settlers, the horrors, in her view, that they continued to suffer, affected her on a personal level,” Julius notes (27). His patient continues, weaving the historical into the personal: “I can’t pretend it isn’t about my life...” she tells Julius, “it’s a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past... It isn’t right that people are not terrified by this because this is a terrifying thing that happened to a vast population. And it’s not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it’s still with me” (27). Later in the novel we learn that this patient has committed suicide. The suggestion is clear: her inability to do what Julius does, to notice, to catalogue, and then to selectively forget, is partly what leads to madness. A few pages later, Julius considers JM Coetzee’s question in *Elizabeth Costello*: “what was the use of going into these recesses of the human heart? Why show torture? Was it not enough to be told, in imprecise detail, that bad things happened?” (31). It is a question that the novel never finds a satisfactory answer to, oscillating as it does between the attempt to show this darkness, and the question of what happens afterwards.

Cole also refuses to consider history as simply past — the history of violence against Native Americans, he suggests, is also a contemporary violence against the individual. Julius seems to exist between several dangerous positions: between the suffering of his patient, who cannot maintain the scholarly remove that Julius practices, and the violent amnesiac, accused of inflicting the suffering he catalogues. Once again, he is sensitive to the power of art to inspire revelation, while blind to the suffering of his neighbours. The city seems to only really reveal itself for what it is — an interested party, a living palimpsest of inscribed violence and power — in these moments of confusion. The suggestion, I believe, is that it is dangerous to be both too

much with the past, as is the case with Julius's patient, or too much with the present, as Julius often is.

3.5 BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT IN THE CITY

When Julius comes across a bust of Paul Claudel in Brussels, he attempts to reconcile the poet's right-wing politics during World War II with his poetic talents. W.H. Auden, Julius notes, wrote "[t]ime will pardon Paul Claudel, pardons him for writing well" (144). Julius briefly weighs up this argument: "I wondered if indeed it was that simple, if time was so free with memory, so generous with pardons, that writing well could come to stand in the place of an ethical life" (144-145). There are worse offenders commemorated around Brussels, he concludes. The line Julius quotes from Auden, however, was originally in a draft of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." A detail glossed over by Julius is that the reference to Claudel never made it into Auden's final version of the poem. If time were to pardon Claudel, then art was failing — and in Cole's view, continues to fail — the political act of remembering. What then of the novel that purports to uncover the city, but does so through a conflicted protagonist, and the problem of memory that seems to be infect the entire novel?

"The mind is opaque to itself," Julius writes late in the novel (238). In a text beset by questions of memory, violence, and the problems of witnessing, blindness seems to be a device that is particularly prevalent. The novel employs a method of selective blindness in interrogating the history of the city. "Ophthalmic science describes an area at the back of the bulb of the eye, the optic disk, where the million or so ganglia of the optic nerve exit the eye," Julius notes, "[i]t is

precisely there, where too many of the neurons associated with vision are clustered, that the vision goes dead,” (239). The novel, in its critique of an elite cosmopolitan reliance on the aesthetic, is willing to engage with this idea of blind insight, I believe, because it seems to be all that is available to Cole, and by extension, to Julius. Here we can return to de Man again. His writing on blindness and insight specifically considers the role of criticism, the act of reading and interpreting a text, which describes Julius as much as it does Cole, or indeed the reader of the novel:

It seems, however, that this insight could only be gained because critics were in the grip of this peculiar blindness: their language could grope toward a certain degree of insight only because their method remained oblivious to the perception of this insight. The insight exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right — the question of his own blindness being one which he is by definition incompetent to ask... (de Man 106)

This form of blind-insight, I believe, asks the reader to hold several contradictory ideas in relation to each other throughout the novel: Julius can be both a villain and a victim, the city is both “open” to being interrogated while it builds over its past, amnesia can also lead to new discovery. The question of the black body in the city is one that allows for this kind of discovery, precisely because he cannot fully assimilate into the normative idea of Western modernity. Here a comparison with O’Neill’s understanding of race is illuminating. My critique in chapter two of this paper included the idea that O’Neill and his protagonist understand race in New York as a

catalogue of difference, where the simple listing of national origin stands in place of actual engagement with the political and ethical concerns of that difference. Julius, from the perspective of the black immigrant, at walking pace, does something similar in his catalogue of Harlem's sights:

I saw the brisk trade of sidewalk salesmen: the Senegalese cloth merchants, the young men selling bootleg DVDs, the Nation of Islam stalls. There were self-published books, dashikis, posters on black liberation, bundles of incense, vials of perfume and essential oils, djembe drums, and little tourist tchotchkes from Africa. One table displayed enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans (18).

What is clearly different in Cole's text, however, is a commitment to reject the equating of difference with nation, but to incorporate an idea of global and historical blackness into the city. The commerce on 125th street is not simply a list of multicultural references, as *Netherland* has it, but rather an attempt to bring together several narratives in one physical place. The list starts benignly: the Senegalese cloth merchant is a seemingly simple reference. As it progresses, however, the passage interweaves criminal elements ("bootleg DVDs," and later surreptitious drug deals), with ideas of black rebellion ("the Nation of Islam stalls," "posters on black revolution"), with the mundane ("tourist tchotchkes" from a homogenized, commodified "Africa"). Finally, the photographs of lynchings seem to signal a sense of finality to this scene: the West African slave-trade, the cotton plantations that produced cloth, which paid for incense

and perfume in Europe — these global histories of trade, blackness, and violence seem to culminate in the idea of the lynched black body.

The same image occurs again, when Julius is in the midst of one of his fugue-states, where historical time and subjective time seem to collapse upon each other.

That afternoon, during which I flitted in and out of myself, when time became elastic and voices cut out of the past into the present, the heart of the city was gripped by what seemed to be a commotion from an earlier time. I feared being caught up in what, it seemed to me, were draft riots... What I saw next gave me a fright: in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head to toe in black, reflecting no light. It soon resolved itself, however, into a less ominous thing: dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind (74-75).

If the presence of an African slave burial ground is a literal example of the way in which the city is built on slavery and violence, then Julius's confusion suggests not just overwriting of history, but the ghostly presence of death that remains for the black city-dweller. While he is often blind to the world around him — the contemporary city — he is also able to find insight into the historical role of blackness in the city. The fact that he mistakes the literal building of the city (canvas on a construction site) with the violence done against black bodies is not coincidental, but a deliberate intervention in the idea of the city as an ethically neutral space, it rejects the idea of “mere” geography or development. Instead, these moments — the dangling canvas, the burial ground — must be continually uncovered and remembered.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Open City is an explicitly political novel, though it is one that refuses to present a coherent political perspective of its own. Instead it is composed much like the city it interrogates, with a palimpsestic sense of vision, memory, and historical violence. As a result, its claims are fractured and temporary, its moments of insight obscured by an acknowledgement of its complicity in the global processes of neocolonialism and oppression that it also denounces. Yet, as I have argued in this final chapter, it is exactly at those moments of dislocation, where personal guilt and historical injustice express themselves through the physical text of New York, that the novel offers glimpses of the ways in which the city can be challenged and reread. In the midst of amnesia and blindness is a kind of memory and vision that the novel offers as a counterpoint to the hegemony of the city, an insistence on remembering the conditions that made the contemporary city. This vision of the city, Cole constantly reminds us, is also compromised and should not be romanticized. Instead the novel operates in opposition to the metropole. If New York City's position in the global imaginary is built upon selective amnesia — an attempt to rebuild over unpleasant historical realities of slavery and genocide — then *Open City* also acknowledges its protagonist's own part in this system, while simultaneously deconstructing it. The reminder of complicity is ever-present. While, as Vermeulen suggests, the novel is sceptical of intercultural empathy's ability to effect real change, it does suggest the ways in which art and literature might be able to contribute to that process, even as it inspires a sense of dislocation and disorientation.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned with several overlapping questions that attempt to reconsider the racialized immigrant's experience of a post-9/11 New York City. Though concerned with figures from very different national, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds, the figures of *Netherland's* Chuck and *Open City's* Julius must both navigate New York City in bodies that are traditionally seen as extrinsic to the city. Their narratives raised a series of common concerns: what does it mean to be a racialized immigrant in the global city? How do forms of mobility affect these experiences? Most importantly, how do these figures suggest possibilities for challenging those cities, and the histories and violences they perpetuate?

In my initial reading of *Netherland* and *Open City*, the answers to these questions were far more clear than they now are. My initial impulse was to read these characters as subversive, disruptive outliers who raised a critical mirror to the city they inhabit, but a succession of readings demonstrated the ways in which the novels, and the characters, are both destabilizing the spaces they inhabit while often being complicit in the injustices they illuminate. A key tension in the writing of this thesis has been the attempt to argue that in spite of these limitations, these characters might still offer a perspective on the city that is both radical and productive in reconsidering the histories of the city, globalization, and ideas of Western modernity. This tension, between the historical nature of the city and the lived experience of the characters of the texts I discuss, speaks to Raymond Williams's idea of "culture and society [being] expressed in an habitual past tense" into which all "living presence is always, by definition, receding" (128). In my reading, I attempted to explore the ways in which the (supposedly) fixed — the historical,

economic, and social structures that produce the city — might be interrogated and reconsidered by the personal, subjective experience of the racialized immigrant, while simultaneously acknowledging the ways in which those experiences are shaped by those same fixed forces.

My reading of *Netherland* initially considered the character of Chuck Ramkissoo as capable of the kind of destabilizing perspective that I claimed the racialized immigrant could have. Instead, I argued, his role was limited by the narrative and political constraints of the broader narrative. As the text occasionally acknowledged, Chuck existed to serve the concerns of the novel's protagonist, Hans. It is Chuck's death that is most crucial to the novel's unfolding, and as such it confirms the idea that the racialized figure in the city is dispensable. Meanwhile, I also argued that the novel's focus on mechanized forms of mobility — the car, the plane — served to distance the protagonist from any serious engagement with New York as a site of anything other than the normative, dominant idea of the global city.

My discussion of *Open City* focused on the tensions between the novel's investment in uncovering the city as a site of both historical and present-day violence, while doing so through the perspective of a deeply problematic narrator who is often seen to be exercising a violence of his own. As such, Cole's novel seems to suggest that the ideas of violence and injustice that underpin the modern global city cannot be relegated to a fixed past, but that these patterns emerge in both the personal and public spheres. My analysis attempted to focus on the idea that these issues are still worth disaggregating, even when they are deeply problematic. One of the ways in which the novel is able to navigate these tensions, I argued, is through the embodied experience of walking the city while coupled with the protagonist's sense of dissociation and

dislocation. Rather than consider his amnesia and confusion as mere flaws, I suggest that it is these moments that allow for insight into the city around him.

I do not wish to suggest a singular method of reading the city, nor texts about the modern racialized immigrant. The claims made in this thesis are tentative and small-scale, and their focus is largely on a form of reading that attempts to understand the relationship between self, space, and history. My reading has been one that seeks to navigate the distance between the big histories — of slavery and migration, capital and the city — and the small narratives — the embodied experience of walking through a neighbourhood, or encountering a stranger on the street. Between the two, I have attempted to show, is the possibility for historical critique that challenges the dominant narrative of the city, and more broadly, of Western modernity.

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